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ABSTRACT

Classroom teachers frequently need techniques for assessing students' reading comprehension; the retelling technique is a useful tool for this purpose. The technique is divided into two parts, the unaided retelling and the aided or directed retelling. During both parts, open-ended, divergent questioning techniques are used. An excerpt from a student's retelling of a story indicates that readers can mispronounce words and yet still understand their meanings, which shows that if a child mispronounces a word while orally reading a passage, it may be best to refrain from immediately correcting the mispronunciation. Correct pronunciation of words may be taught later, with the words placed in the context of a sentence or paragraph. A second excerpt from a child's retelling illustrates that children may be able to pronounce words correctly yet have no understanding of their meanings, due to a lack of background information. Teachers need to engage students in prereading activities that facilitate the acquisition of the background information needed for reading a particular passage or story. (GW)

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The Retelling Technique: An Avenue for Investigating and Enhancing Comprehension

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The Retelling Technique: An Avenue for Investigating and Enhancing Comprehension

Many teachers with whom I have worked have expressed concern about reading comprehension. They are troubled over their students' abilities to analyze critically what is read. Also, they have wondered why some children can pronounce all the words in a story and still not comprehend the story while other children who have difficulty pronouncing words can understand the story. These teachers have related that they would like to learn a technique which can be used to better understand reading comprehension so that lessons can be developed to facilitate the acquisition of the comprehension skills needed by their students.

Although the most frequently used measure of a student's reading comprehension is the score on a published reading test, the teachers do not feel that the score a pupil receives on a standardized reading test given once or twice a year provides enough information. Spache and Spache (1977, p. 445) discuss the problems in reading tests which attempt to measure reading comprehension. They state:

> The grade score obtained from a comprehension test tells us simply that the testee answered about as many questions correctly (no matter which ones or what their relative difficulty) as children of a certain grade level on whom the test was tried out. We are not told anything about the quality or depth of his comprehension, or how it was obtained, or how much more he may have learned from

the reading, or how much he knew about the subject before he read our test selection.

Furthermore, questions are usually not open-ended and typically measure literal understanding of the text, rather than the reader's ability to think critically and apply the information read. The questions themselves usually supply the reader with information which may not have been assimilated while reading. For instance, a question like "Why did Freddie turn Elizabeth's doll green?" furnishes the reader with the following information which he/she may or may not have known:

a. There are at least two people in the story, a boy and a girl.

b. The boy's name is Freddie and the girl's name is Elizabeth.

c. Freddie turned Elizabeth's doll green.

Asking questions which provide such information precludes the questioner from knowing as much as possible about the student's comprehension. For these reasons, the comprehension questions usually asked in standardized reading tests provide only limited information. In an effort to glean as much information as possible, miscue analysis has departed from using the usual questioning technique employed by standardized tests and has adopted another technique called the retelling (Goodman and Burke, 1973).

The Retelling Technique

The retelling technique is divided into two parts, the unaided retelling and the aided or directed retelling. During both parts, open-ended, divergent questioning techniques are used. Immediately following the reading, the reader is asked to tell as much as can be remembered

about what was read. This unaided retelling provides information about the reader's initial understanding of the material without any prompting. Questions such as, "Tell me everything you can remember about the story," are asked. If the reader stops, he/she is encouraged to continue with the unaided retelling for as long as possible. Statements like, "Go on," "Is there anything else that you can remember?" or "What else happened?" are very helpful at this stage. If the reader does not receive some prompting or encouragement to continue, much information about the reader's initial understanding can be lost. Furthermore, the more information about the story that is given by the reader during the unaided part, the easier it is for the teacher or questioner to formulate questions for the directed retelling.

When the reader has finished retelling all that can be remembered, specific questions about the material are asked. The purposes of the aided or directed retelling are to gather information which the reader ignored or dealt with superficially in his/her unaided retelling and to clarify statements without providing any additional information to the reader. In other words, the information provided by the reader during the unaided retelling is used to formulate questions for the aided or directed portion. The questions remain divergent and open-ended. For example, if the reader related, "The kid won the race," one does not ask, "How did Bob win the track race?", for that question provides information that it was a boy named Bob who won and he won a track race, not some other kind of race. One cannot assume that the reader has assimilated any information that was not made explicit during the unaided retelling

portion. Instead, questions like "Tell me more about the race that the kid won," or "Tell me about the kid who won the race," are asked. This type of question uses the reader's information to elicit additional responses which require the reader to expand and clarify statements and ideas. At this point, it is also important to ask questions which require students to explain the reasons for their responses. When students are asked to provide a rationale for their answers, the teacher can gain valuable insights into the critical thinking skills employed by the reader. This approach does not bind a reader to an answer or a particular response style, but actually encourages students to expound their own interpretations of what was read, to explore the reasons for their interpretations and to develop critical reading skills. It can provide the teacher or questioner with information which cannot be gathered through typical post-story questions.

The successful implementation of this technique depends on one's ability to practice judicious silence. The questioner must be able to wait patiently and quietly without interjecting a comment or question, which is more difficult than it seems. Interruptions can interfere with the reader's train of thought, especially if another question is asked when the student is still formulating his/her response to a prior question. Furthermore, this technique also requires the questioner to listen attentively to the reader's responses to the questions. This is particularly important because the ability to use the reader's responses to ask open-ended questions is dependent upon careful listening.

The following discussion includes excerpts from student retellings which exemplify how retellings can be used as a tool for discovering a student's level of understanding and how teachers can use that information when planning for reading instruction.

Retellings: Insights into Comprehension and Implications for Instruction

Listening to a child read orally is one method teachers use to evaluate reading proficiency. This is particularly true in the beginning and middle elementary grades. Because of the emphasis on accurate oral reading, teachers tend to correct immediately mispronunciations of words during the oral reading session. Teachers are concerned that the reader's mispronunciations of a word will affect his/her grasp of the meaning of that word and will result in a lack of comprehension of the written material. The following retelling, however, indicates that it is unnecessary for a reader to pronounce a word correctly in order to understand the meaning of the word. For example, in one story the word catastrophe appeared three times and catastrophes appeared five times. Although the two story illustrations did not provide visual clues to help the reader understand the meaning of those words, there were summary type contextual clues (McCullough, 1958) in the story. After repeated attempts at trying to figure out the correct pronunciation for the word catastrophes (this word appeared in the beginning of the story's body), both readers finally settled for catas (kə-tăs'). They had difficulty with the last two syllables. Nevertheless,

both readers understood the meaning of the word catastrophe and could provide examples of catastrophes. The following retelling is an example of this phenomenon.

Example 1

S: Katie was in a, I don't know how to say that long word. She was so scared, but she wanted to be in one.

Q: How do you think that long word is pronounced?

S: Catas? I just don't know.

Q: OK, what's a catas?

S: That's when something bad happens and we don't think it will.

Q: Can you give me some examples?

S: Yea, I think I can.

Q: What are some?

S: The book said tornadoes and floods are catas-c I can't say that word.

Q: Give me some other examples that weren't in the story.

S: Um, a big ice storm that makes all the power go out, when, when we have you know terrible, terrible weather stuff happening.

Mispronunciations of words do not necessarily mean that the reader will lose the meaning of that word. Readers can mispronounce words and still understand the meaning of those words because of contextual clues in the passage. This is especially true if the reader has had experience with the concepts attached to the words prior to reading

the story or passage in which the word appears. Constant and immediate correction of words mispronounced during instruction may give a child the idea that the most important task of reading is saying the words correctly rather than gaining meaning. It also does not allow a child opportunities to regress and employ self-correction strategies when reading. Allen (1976, p. 109) states that unnecessary prompting, insisting on super-correct oral reading, discouraging guessing, not allowing readers to regress, and confusing reading instruction with other areas of instruction such as, "correct pronunciation" are "areas of interference" which short circuit the child's ability to deal with the reading process.

If a child mispronounces a word in a passage, it may be better to refrain from immediately correcting the mispronunciation. Not correcting the mispronunciation and then asking questions about the reader's understanding of that mispronounced word can provide evidence about whether or not the reader used contextual clues effectively while reading. The mispronounced word, however, should not go unnoticed. After the entire selection has been read and the questioning session is over, the child should be helped to learn the correct pronunciation of the incorrectly pronounced word and follow-up instruction should provide reinforcement and practice for the newly learned word. A word of caution is appropriate at this point. Rather than presenting the word on a flashcard or list for the student to memorize, it is better to develop activities which use the word in a sentence or

paragraph. When children confront newly learned words in the context of a sentence or paragraph, they can utilize graphophonic clues along with the contextual clues suggested by Emans (1969): meaning, language, and organization. If the word is put on a flashcard, then a student generated sentence which includes that word should be written on the other side of the flashcard. This will provide the child with meaning and language clues if the word alone is not remembered.

Further, if the teacher thinks that the pupil needs instruction in the "ph" consonant digraph because only the first two syllables of the word catastrophe or catastrophes were pronounced, the teacher should informally evaluate whether or not that skill is needed. To determine if that skill is actually lacking by the student, the teacher should have the student read a story or paragraph and note if the student has repeated difficulty whenever a word which has "ph" in it is encountered. Should the teacher notice that additional instruction in the "ph" diagraph is needed, then activities should be developed which integrate that phonic element with the contextual clues used in reading. For example, sentences like the following integrate the use of graphophonic and contextual clues: Tom heard the ph___ ring as he opened the door. It was the ph_____, who called to remind Tom that he had an appointment to get his picture taken. After he put down the t___ph___, his mother came home from work. Phonics instruction isolated from context could reinforce the notion that the most important cueing system in reading is the phonetic element of the word. Children should be helped to realize that there are other cues which operate simultaneously with phonic elements

when reading. Spache and Spache (1977, p. 385) state:

> Teach children to utilize any or all other clues to word meaning simultaneously with phonics, such as word form, picture, context, and structure clues. The goal of phonics training is not to train children in a letter-by-letter, sound-by-sound approach to word recognition. Pupils should be taught to use as few phonic clues as possible in the effort to recall or recognize the word. In many instances, the simple sound of the initial consonant or blend should suggest a word that makes sense in that sentence. Ideally speaking, most of the practice with phonic elements should occur with words in context to stimulate the reading act and promote use of other clues. Most available teaching materials ignore this principle, unfortunately.

Besides using phonic elements, syntax and semantics while reading, all readers bring their wealth of knowledge and background experiences to the reading situation. Both the knowledge and background experiences of a reader contribute to the understanding gained from the story. The more information a reader brings to the reading situation, the more he/she will gain from the reading. On the other hand, lack of knowledge or background information makes reading difficult and affects the amount of information gleaned from the passage. When discussing its limiting effect on comprehension, Smith (1975, p. 49) states, "A child makes

sense of the world by relating the unfamiliar to the known, but if very little 'known' can be brought to bear on a particular occasion, little will be comprehended or perceived." Smith also explains that the nonvisual information (background information) which the reader supplies when reading is more important for understanding than the written material itself. The following example illustrates this point.

In one story, the word chemicals appeared four times and chemistry appeared twice. In all instances, the reader was able to pronounce those words. However, during the directed retelling, the reader was unable to explain the meaning of either words.

Example 2

Q: What's a scientist? Do you know?

S: A scientist is a person who works on experiments.

Q: Here's this word chemistry. Do you know what chemistry means?

S: Um, I, I, No.

Q: It says in the story that he was experimenting with his chemistry set. What's that?

S: Um, No.

Q: Do you know what a chemistry set is?

S: No (emphatically).

Q: What are chemicals?

S: I just don't know that.

Q: What do you think it means?

S: I don't know.

Q: Take a guess.

S: Maybe it's, I don't know.

This reader's directed retelling indicates that although she understood that scientists work on experiments, she did not understand what chemicals are or that some scientists use chemicals when conducting experiments. It is probable that this reader lacked the necessary background knowledge and experiences with a chemistry set or chemicals to understand the meaning of those words, even though they were pronounced correctly.

A teacher needs to be aware of the kind of background knowledge a child must have in order to understand a passage or story. Some children can pronounce words correctly, but may have difficulty comprehending a piece of written work not because they are slow or need remedial help with reading, but because they don't have the knowledge and experience for concepts they encounter in the written materials. If teachers find that students lack the pre-requisite knowledge necessary to understand a reading assignment, they should either discard the assignment or engage students in pre-reading activities which facilitate the acquisition of the necessary background information so that their students possess the needed frame of reference for comprehending the passage or story.

Since a child's first hand experience is the strongest base for acquiring and understanding new concepts and vocabulary words, it

is naive to think that putting words on the chalkboard in a list will actually help a student to understand the meaning of those words. As Spache and Spache (1977, p. 416) suggest, tactile, visual and psychomotor observations underlie the acquisition of understanding word meaning. If it is difficult to provide first-hand experiences for the child, then audio-visual materials such as films, pictures and filmstrips should be used because they can provide meaningful associations for the child.

While looking the word up in the dictionary provides denotative meanings, the words are divorced from the context and connotative meanings. Dictionaries are more helpful for clarifying meaning, for checking pronunciation when part of the word is known and for checking spelling and syllabication, rather than for learning meaning. Since words are only symbols for ideas and experiences, developing activities that provide experiential understanding of the key words and concepts presented in the story or paragraph is necessary before a child can be successful in understanding the story. Correct pronunciation of a word does not logically presume accurate understanding of the word.

Concluding Statement

The retelling technique is a useful tool which teachers can use. It can help teachers discover the degree to which a student understands the written material and provide direction for developing follow-up teaching activities which insure that the child receives instruction in the basic skills necessary for continued development in reading.

Research by Guszak (1967) and Taba (1965) indicate that student comprehension is affected by teacher questioning strategies. If teachers want to develop critical thinking skills, then the questions they ask should require more than "yes" or "no" responses. The development of critical thinking skills demands that questions focus beyond the literal level and ask students to examine the reasons for their answers. Students should not be expected only to parrot back the literal information presented in the passage or story.

By asking open-ended questions focused beyond the literal level of comprehension, students are required to relate information about characters, events and details and develop critical thinking skills by answering the inferential, analytical and evaluative type questions. Only if students are unable to answer "why" questions when initially presented to them, should literal questions be posed.

Perhaps the major benefit of using the retelling technique is that it reinforces the notion that the goal of reading is not simply to sound out words or to relate the facts. Rather, it can help readers learn that the goal of reading is to extract meaning, a personal meaning. Only when this happens can reading be appreciated and understood as the active process it is, with the reader as participant. Using proper question asking techniques can help achieve this end.

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